

EAT WILD

BY AMY CROWELL

Let's face it, gathering edible wild plants is hard work for small rewards. And since wild pickings are slim this time of year, the hunting part of hunting-and-gathering is the way to go.

Despite the prevalence of farm-raised venison, the white-tailed deer most commonly hunted in our area is still wild and abundant, reminding us that even in our modern society, we can experience the ancient art of hunting and eating our kill.

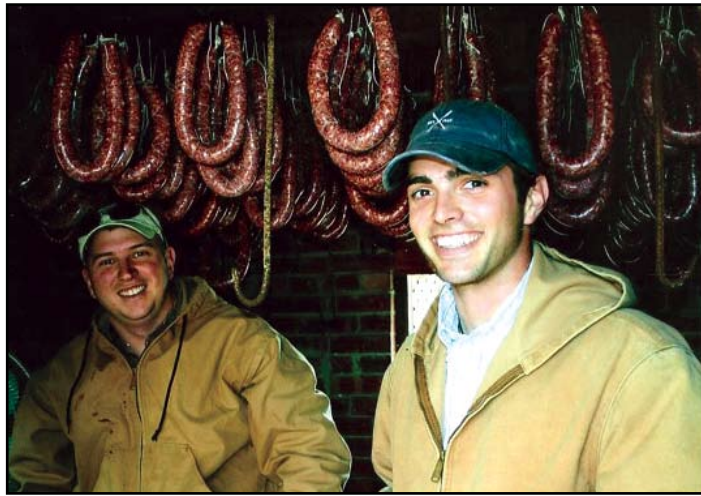
Though I've never killed anything in my life—other than that tree lizard I shot with a pellet gun—deer hunting was a big part of my small-town childhood in Hondo and D'Hanis, Texas, and I do enjoy a good pork-venison sausage sandwich.

The deer season, occurring roughly between November and January, with special exceptions for bow hunters and kids, was ushered into my town just as fervently as the high school football season. Gunshots rang out on opening day, usually at the crack of dawn, and, on Sundays trucks and SUVs would stream through town with deer carcasses strapped to their luggage racks, bound for meat markets that specialized in custom processing.

The tradition of hunting camps in my hometown goes back to my great-great-great-grandfather's time, when venison was a necessary source of protein for the lean winter months. Each year, my grandpa went to hunting camp at a ranch known as the Bushwack, where his job was to bring in and process the deer that would feed the hunters during the week ahead. I spent many formative years camping out at the Bushwack, and the sight of a dead deer hanging upside down from an oak with its guts exposed, ready to be cut into legs, ribs, rumps and loins, didn't bother me.

My father carries on the tradition every year on the weekend after Thanksgiving, when he packs his sleeping bag and rifle in his truck and drives a few miles north to a friend's ranch. There, he spends a week walking the hills, hunting the biggest buck, playing poker, drinking beer and eating venison stew and sausage with his friends and fellow hunters. Growing up, my only glimpses of dad's hunting camp happened on "ladies night," when wives and children were invited for dinner.

Though most hunters these days pay to have their kill commercially processed, this is not so on the more traditional ranches, where hunters and friends gather every winter at



the end of hunting season to make pork-venison sausage from scratch, a custom that dates back to their old-world roots in Alsace-Lorraine. Many Texas families continue to make sausage the old way, with a hand-cranked grinder. As a child at these sausage-making parties, I was allowed to hold the casing (hog guts) on the sausage stuffer (an attachment at the end of the meat grinder) and guide the raw sausage mixture through

to form a link. To a 10-year-old, the parties were pure fun—a time to gather and laugh and play with other kids while the adults worked over piles of meat destined for their smokehouses and freezers. As an adult, I feel lucky to have been a part of a food tradition that still thrives in my hometown.

Photography of Jon Rothe (left) and Clark Wells; Dennis Herrmann

PORK-VENISON SAUSAGE

I got this old family recipe from D'Hanis hog farmer, deer hunter and sausage-maker Dennis Herrmann. Use this recipe as a guide, but if you're serious about making sausage, try to get invited to a few sausage-making parties, where you can learn from the pros. I consider sausage-making a culinary art that takes time, persistence and a good smokehouse. It's also a great reason to get together with friends and family to celebrate a Texas food tradition. (Equipment note: The equipment for sausage-making is a big investment. At the very least, you will need a meat grinder with a sausage-stuffer attachment.)

- 100 lbs. ground meat (60% lean pork/40% venison or 50% fatty pork/50% venison)
- 1 ½ lbs. salt
- ¾ lb. black pepper (or substitute ¼ lb. cayenne pepper)
- 1 ½ lbs. coriander
- ¼ c. mustard seeds (optional)
- 4-6 heads of garlic (peel cloves and place in a blender; add 2 c. water and blend.)
- Hog casings ("Don't use the synthetic casings! They're just not as good," says Dennis.)

Mix meat and spices together—preferably by hand—and pour the garlic-water mixture over the top. Remember—always season the meat before you grind! Load the meat into the grinder, crank it through the sausage stuffer and fill the casings. Vacuum-pack the finished links for freezing, or smoke them once or twice for dried sausage. You can also cook and eat the sausage right then and there.